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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 02 IRAN RPO DUBAI 000052

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TAGS: IR PGOV PREL SOCI SCUL

SUBJECT: USG-INVITED IRANIAN FILMMAKERS FACE REPRISALS

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CLASSIFIED BY: Ramin Asgard, Acting Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S/NF) Summary: The Iranian government has been exerting pressure on some participants in the International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) for documentary filmmakers after their return to Iran. One filmmaker who is a friend of a participant in the May/June 2007 IVLP program told IRPO that all seven of the participants in that program had their passports confiscated upon their return to Iran and face hearings at the Revolutionary Court within the next month. They have been told they will not be allowed to travel outside Iran for a year, but the government is apparently not interfering with their work. It is important to note that this is the only IVLP group for Iran thus far that has faced any reprisals from the government upon their return. In related news, renowned Iranian filmmaker Kamran Shirdel issued a public refusal to attend an event (not sponsored by the USG) in the US honoring his work as a protest against USG policies toward Iran, including a likely reference to the IVLP program. End summary.

2.(S/NF) Iranian participants in the May/June 2007 State Department's International Visitors Leadership Program (IVLP) for documentary filmmakers have reportedly been subject to some government pressure and travel bans since their return to Iran, as reported by some of the participants by email to IRPoffs and a friend of one the participants (who is himself a documentary filmmaker). The filmmakers had defied a warning from the Islamic Culture and Guidance Ministry not to participate and traveled to the US for the USG-sponsored program. Ministry officials indicated to the filmmakers their belief that the IVLP program was political, not cultural, in nature.

3.(S/NF) Four of the IVLP participants returned from the US a few days ahead of the other three and had their passports confiscated. They then warned the rest but the other three chose to return to Iran nonetheless and also had their passports taken. The friend who met with IRPoff August 15 said he suspected that one of the seven participants was a "spy" for the Iranian government, without offering a specific name.

4.(S/NF) The IVLP participants have been called before the revolutionary court for hearings, with court dates set for sometime within the next month (mid-August to mid-September 2007). According to the friend, when the seven filmmakers attempted to travel to some European countries for film

festivals, they were told that they will not be permitted to travel outside the country for one year. The government has not otherwise interfered with the work of the IVLP participants since their return to Iran, according to the contact. In emails from Iran, several participants have indicated to IRPoffs that they believe their problems will be resolved soon and that the benefits of the exchange outweigh the difficulties they are now facing.

5.(C) There is apparently no general travel ban to the US for filmmakers. Two filmmakers and an actor applied for visas to the US in the past two weeks - one, the friend cited above, who is screening his short documentary in a New York film festival, and another filmmaker and one of his actors who are planning to screen their fiction film in California. The actor alleged that the Culture and Islamic Guidance ministry had seized the film earlier this year when they intended to screen it in the US, but they appear to have received the ministry's permission to screen the film now and they plan to travel to the US for that purpose in the coming month. The second filmmaker said he intends to invite some Americans involved in film to Iran on a cultural exchange, and the first filmmaker told IRPoff that he would like to make a documentary about applying for a US visa.

6.(C) Comment: Iranian government paranoia of a US-led "soft" revolution and crackdown on intellectual ties with the US means that cultural exchanges with Iran are likely to remain politicized. It is important to note, however, that this is the only IVLP group for Iran thus far that has faced reprisals from the government upon return to Iran. Separately, renowned Iranian filmmaker Kamran Shirdel made a veiled reference to USG cultural programs in his public refusal to attend a ceremony organized in his honor by the Asia Society in New York in October 2007 in protest of US policy. Among other charges, he said, the "secret programs of the US government which (they claim) are contrived to 'help' Iranian artists and intellectuals prove correct the theory that the United States does not want or

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cannot permit other nations to choose, decide, and gain experience on their own, so it tries to subvert their values and ruin all their experiences." As long as the Iranian government does not overtly ban participation in USG programs like the IVLP, however, at least some invitees are likely to continue to take the opportunity.

BURNS